[Animated 'Book of Life' Celebrates](http://www.npr.org/blogs/codeswitch/2014/10/14/356045103/animated-book-of-life-celebrates-d-a-de-los-muertos) *[Día De Los Muertos](http://www.npr.org/blogs/codeswitch/2014/10/14/356045103/animated-book-of-life-celebrates-d-a-de-los-muertos)*

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RACHEL MARTIN, HOST:

The Day of the Dead holiday, celebrated throughout Latin America, is a chance for families to gather and remember the lives of loved ones who've passed on to the afterlife. It's that idea of crossing over into another kind of existence that captured the imagination of animator Jorge Gutierrez. He's made a 3-D film centered on the Day of the Dead, and even though it's his first full-length feature, he managed to convince an Oscar-winning Hollywood filmmaker to produce it. NPR's Mandalit del Barco has their story.

MANDALIT DEL BARCO, BYLINE: The "Book of Life" is set in 1920s Mexico and centers on three friends - feisty Maria, voiced by Zoe Saldana...

(SOUNDBITE OF FILM, "THE BOOK OF LIFE")

ZOE SALDANA: (As Maria) Did I mention I studied fencing?

DEL BARCO: ...And her two suitors, Joaquin, the local stud voiced by Channing Tatum...

(SOUNDBITE OF FILM, "THE BOOK OF LIFE")

CHANNING TATUM: (As Joaquin) Hey, girl. I get that a lot.

DEL BARCO: ...And soft-spoken Manolo, voiced by Diego Luna. He's supposed to follow his ancestors and be a bull fighter, but he doesn't want to and ends up apologizing to a bull in the ring.

(SOUNDBITE OF FILM, "THE BOOK OF LIFE")

DIEGO LUNA: (As Manolo Sanchez, singing) I'm sorry. Toro, I am sorry. Hear my song and know I sing the truth. Although we were bred to fight, I reach for kindness in your heart tonight.

DEL BARCO: This being a Day of the Dead movie, some of the characters are transported to the afterlife, something Mexican-born director Jorge Gutierrez says has fascinated him ever since his childhood, when his best friend died.

JORGE GUTIERREZ: My parents sat me down, said, your friend, Mauricio, he is with you as long as you tell his jokes and you remember him and you keep his memory alive by talking about him.

DEL BARCO: And that's what Dia de los Muertos, the Day of the Dead is all about, celebrating the lives of those who came before. Later Gutierrez proposed to and then married his wife on the holiday so his friend Mauricio could be there.

GUTIERREZ: I said, well, I want him to be the best man in my wedding, so we have to get married on Day of the Dead, so he can come. He was at the wedding, and, you know, maybe it's the tequila talking, but I remember my favorite wrestler showed up, who had passed away. All these family members from different eras, I could feel they were there with us. And so with Day of the Dead being such a beautiful thing and such an important part of my life, I really wanted to pass that to the world.

DEL BARCO: As a student at the California Institute of the Arts, Gutierrez wrote his own Day of the

Dead story with ideas and characters based on himself and his family. He used it to produce a 3-D student film called "Carmelo" that won a 2001 Emmy and was shown at the Cannes Film Festival. Gutierrez tried pitching it as a full-length feature to all of the major studios.

GUTIERREZ: Here was this Mexican kid saying, hey, it's a movie about death for children, and so I kind of scared everybody and everybody turned me down (laughter). They said, you know, you're just a kid out of school, and this subject matter is too, too weird and honestly, a little dark.

DEL BARCO: Gutierrez and his wife, Sandra Equihua, by then his artistic partner, went on to create Mexican-themed cartoons for Sony and Nickelodeon, including "El Tigre: The Adventures Of Manny Rivera."

(SOUNDBITE OF TV SHOW, "EL TIGRE: THE ADVENTURES OF MANNY RIVERA")

UNIDENTIFIED MAN: Son of White Pantera, a noble super hero.

DEL BARCO: Eventually a studio in El Paso called Real FX understood Gutierrez's idea for a Day of the Dead movie and encouraged him to approach Guillermo del Toro to produce it.

GUTIERREZ: This will go down in the history of cinema as the worst pitch of all time.

DEL BARCO: Gutierrez says he took all the artwork he and his wife created for the film and set it up near the pool at his filmmaking hero's house in LA.

GUTIERREZ: And he goes, you have five minutes to pitch to me. And before a word can come out, my people betray me. And it must've been like 10 gardening guys in the house next door, and all the lawnmowers and leaf blowers went on at the same time, making this horrible noise. So I'm yelling the pitch to - 'cause he says, don't stop. And Manolo proposes with all his heart. And he can't hear me, and I almost fall in the pool three times - disaster - so we go back into his house, and I'm drenched in sweat. He's sweating, and I'm ready to just shake his hand and get out of there and say I got to meet him. And Guillermo goes, Jorge, that was a terrible pitch (laughter). And I go, I know, I know, I'm so sorry I wasted your time. And, you know, I get up to shake his hand, and he goes no, no sit-down. He goes, I know exactly who you are.

GUILLERMO DEL TORO: Yeah, my daughters and I used to watch "El Tigre" on TV and we loved it.

He has a uniquely Mexican style, and when he came in, I was already a fan.

DEL BARCO: Del Toro says he agreed to produce "The Book Of Life" on the spot.

DEL TORO: I could see through his nervousness how important it was to him. It's a gorgeous movie, and we wanted very much to show and represent how powerful the Mexican visuals and sounds and music and the sense of life are, you know.

DEL BARCO: The soundtrack includes Mexican Bolero and Norteno versions of songs by Radiohead, Rod Stewart and Biz Markie.

(SOUNDBITE OF FILM, "THE BOOK OF LIFE")

CHEECH MARIN: (As Pancho, singing) You, you got what I need. But you say he's just a friend. But you say he's just a friend. Oh, baby you...

DEL BARCO: Jorge Gutierrez says he wanted an older look for his film, so he reached back to folk art. He had a team of Central American artisans carve wooden puppets of the movie's characters, which were later rendered by computer animation, says producer Guillermo del Toro.

DEL TORO: Jorge wanted to create this world that felt handmade with wooden puppets and metal and paint. It really feels very much like a Mexican Baroque.

DEL BARCO: At "The Book of Life" premiere on Sunday, some of the audience members said they were glad Gutierrez's movie got to the screen before a proposed Disney-Pixar film on the same subject. Disney had tried to co-opt the very name of the holiday.

LALO ALCARAZ: I, along with every other Latino pretty much, were outraged and shocked when Disney tried to copyright the term Dia de los Muertos or Day of the Dead.

DEL BARCO: Cartoonist Lalo Alcaraz says he's especially glad "The Book of Life" was directed and produced by two Mexicans.

ALCARAZ: To have two people that understand the topic thoroughly and respect it and can play with it - it was good. It's a playful way to treat a serious topic. You love your family, you know. You miss your family. One day you'll see your family again, and that's what the Day of the Dead holiday is all about, is remembering your family and remembering that love. So that what "Book Of Life" is about.

DEL BARCO: "The Book of Life," written and directed by Jorge Gutierrez, opens two weeks before the Day of the Dead, November 2. Maybe his old friend Mauricio will visit a theater. Mandalit del Barco, NPR News.

[POST-BROADCAST CORRECTION: In the audio of this story, we incorrectly say that Reel TV is located in El Paso, Texas. It's actually in Dallas.] Copyright © 2014 NPR. All rights reserved. No quotes from the materials contained herein may be used in any media without attribution to NPR.